

## APA DISASTER RESPONSE NETWORK

# Helping Communities in Times of Crisis

## Making a Difference in Challenging Times

**D**isasters affect the lives of thousands of Americans every year. When facing the devastation and disruption caused by a disaster, many find themselves in need of emotional support and accurate information to start on the road to recovery.

The American Psychological Association Disaster Response Network (DRN) provides a valuable service during these stressful times by helping affected individuals and families, as well as disaster responders, cope with difficult emotions and challenges. No matter the scale of the disaster, DRN psychologists may find themselves volunteering locally or helping in a nationwide effort.



### Meeting Urgent Needs

Following two large disasters in 1989, the American Red Cross realized that it needed to help its volunteers manage the stress inherent in disaster response work. APA created the Disaster Response Network (DRN) in 1992 so licensed psychologists could work with Red Cross volunteers and the communities they serve.

Psychologists have since responded to some of the most devastating events in our nation, offering essential emotional support and helping those affected begin their recovery from the disaster.

The growing network now lists more than 2,500 specially trained psychologists among its ranks.

### Engaging the Network

The DRN is composed of local disaster response programs, which are managed by each state, provincial and territorial psychological association. APA serves as a resource for

*“The APA Disaster Response Network has provided me with the opportunity to work with colleagues across the country and to have a role in the development of trainings.”*

*Ray Hanbury, PhD, ABPP, New Jersey*



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information and as a liaison between the states, provinces and territories, and disaster response organizations.

When DRN members respond to disasters, they do not provide on-site therapy. Instead, they use their training and professional judgment to help people employ their own coping skills and resources to deal with extremely stressful and often tragic circumstances. Psychologists help people to problem-solve, make referrals to community resources, advocate for workers' and survivors' needs, provide information and listen.

Away from disaster sites, DRN members have important roles in the community. Many teach courses on disaster mental health, serve on committees to better prepare for future disasters and educate the public and media about common reactions to trauma.

*Disaster work is difficult – it's not for everyone. It requires great flexibility, the ability to collaborate effectively under stressful conditions, and the capacity to witness suffering without becoming overwhelmed.*

*Kit O'Neill, PhD, North Dakota*

- Approximately 880 DRN psychologists traveled to the Gulf Coast region to provide volunteer aid after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Several hundred more DRN members provided encouragement at shelters across the United States where former Gulf Coast residents made temporary homes.
- More than 50 individuals, including psychologists, assisted local efforts after the shootings on the Virginia Tech campus in April 2007. Volunteers offered emotional support to students and families at a comfort center on campus.

## Answering the Call

Licensed psychologists interested in joining the DRN are required to complete disaster mental health training. A number of organizations, including the American Red Cross, professional associations, universities and government

agencies, offer disaster instruction.

For more information on training and joining the DRN, contact the DRN coordinator of your state, provincial or territorial psychological association.

Answering a call to help when tragedy strikes requires flexibility and resilience. The contributions of DRN members help communities in need while advancing a profession dedicated to providing high-quality care.

## Volunteering at the Scene

The DRN has responded to hundreds of disasters, large and small. Its members have shared their professional time, talent and skills at the sites of distressing local and national events.

For example:

- DRN members most frequently respond to tragedies close to home, with residential fires comprising the majority of response needs.
- Following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, DRN psychologists mobilized in the New York City area, Pennsylvania and at the Pentagon. They worked in disaster assistance centers and hosted open houses to provide a forum for community support.
- DRN volunteers in Kansas helped out their fellow Kansans when tornadoes destroyed the town of Greensburg in the spring of 2007.



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